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ABSTRACT

Male chauvinism and its counterpart, a hostile feminism, are inherently competitive stances. The discord can be mitigated, however, by a redefinition of the work situation. To cite one example of the changes which can be brought about with respect to sex-typing and the politics of language in counseling and psychotherapy, a constructive alternative to the adversarial relations that participants were accustomed to in everyday life was created within the microcosm of an advanced practicum. At the end of the practicum there were fewer occasions for sexual chauvinism and its expression in language than there were at the beginning. (BN)

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SEX-TYPING AND THE POLITICS OF LANGUAGE IN COUNSELING AND PSYCHOTHERAPY

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Some years ago, I wrote a letter in Spanish to a colleague in Mexico City. His reply indicated the effort to have been a noble one. "What is lacking in orthography," he wrote back graciously in the same language, "Is compensated for in vigor and heart!" Those who would tell us how we should talk to our clients, or who should counsel whom in the first place, appear to be as spiritedly well-intentioned and as poorly informed. In the wake of the feminist movement, there is a new rhetoric concerning the role of sex in counseling and psychotherapy. Here, too, it seems the ideas are advanced less by knowledge than by passion. As George Stricker (1977) indicates in a current review of pertinent research, no adequate study of the phenomenon exists--of males vis-à-vis females or even of reference to gender (cf. DeStefano, 1977, Reference Note 1) in therapy. The closest approximation and the procedure most often followed is the analogue study, in which more-or-less experienced therapists are asked to respond as if they were in an actual treatment situation; the results are still equivocal. As Clara Hill (1976) points out, it may well be that sex differences are less powerful in determining therapeutic outcomes than other variables, such as "which treatment by what therapist. . .for what client with what type of problem under what conditions" (p. 53).

The studies most widely cited, in support of the idea that sex role stereotypes exist and affect therapeutic outcomes, are those reported by the Brovermans and their colleagues (Broverman, Broverman, Clarkson,

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Rosenkrantz, and Vogel, 1970; Rosenkrantz, Vogel, Bee, Broverman, & Broverman, 1968). In a discussion of this research, Stricker (1977) describes its methodological inadequacies and refers to subsequent, more extensive investigations (unpublished), which purport to demonstrate that experienced therapists--of either sex--are significantly less likely than inexperienced ones to engage in sex role stereotyping.

However, the polemics continue unabated. In the latest issue of The Clinical Psychologist, for example, the current President of APA's Division of Clinical Psychology, apparently nettled by the pressure from women members of his division to have equal opportunity for employment and status within the Division, argues that women should be less militant in their claims and devote more energy to being equally competent. That he claims, in a pronouncement certain to evoke a storm of protest, will rectify any presently existing inequality. In the same issue, Annette Brodsky (1977) writes of "consciousness raising of both sexes to the subtle, long-standing stereotypes about sex roles. . .Training to conduct therapy with the opposite sex is not complete until there is experience with a supervisor of the opposite sex" (p. 14).

Although in agreement with Stricker (1977) that we remain ignorant about the validity of sexual stereotypes, I do not wish to dismiss them out of hand. To the objects of stereotyping and to those who believe and act upon them, these things are real enough. Rather, I want to identify sex role stereotyping and counteraction to it with a more pervasive phenomenon in human social life. Marx and Useem (1971) help us to understand it and counteractive feminism by reference to civil rights movements in the U.S. and India. In India, Marx and Useem (1971) point to the case of the Untouchables, at one time the protegés of the late Mahatma Ghandi; in the U.S., reference is made to the Blacks, sponsored during the 19th Century by

the white abolitionists and by white liberals and leftwing radicals during the 40s, 50s, and 60s of this century. In all three cases, there was an initial patronage of the downtrodden groups by persons from a higher caste, succeeded by a rising militancy among the downtrodden and a casting off of their patrons. Something similar has been happening among militant women's groups. There is an even more pervasive dynamic at work here, I believe, which I should like to describe briefly for you now.

Rogelio Diaz-Guerrero (1969), the distinguished Mexican psychologist, identified the dynamic in his presidential address to the Interamerican Congress of Psychology as the Blindness of the Powerful which initially elicits the Susceptibility of the Weak. Later, he said, the latter response is likely to become one of Paranoid Suspiciousness. Also, of counteractive militancy, he might have added. His representative anecdote was the forays of North American social scientists into the conduct of research in Latin America. This activity, initially welcomed by Latin Americans, had come to be viewed by them as insensitive and exploitive. Michael Patton and I were able to apply Diaz-Guerrero's (1969) formulation to the relationship between "experimenter" and "subject" in the psychological experiment (Patton and Pepinsky, 1971). Our prediction of trouble ahead for the blindly powerful experimenter--in this and other arenas where humans were the objects of research--has been amply documented since as a matter of public policy, notably in the Federal Government's firm strictures against abuses in research on human subjects (Mitchell, Kaul, & Pepinsky, in press; cf. Wilson, Reference Note 2).

Quite by accident, I have just been witness to a drama in which the metaphor of the blindly powerful agency evoking paranoid suspiciousness in a putatively weaker reagent was reenacted. The protagonists were male and female members of an advanced counseling practicum, which two younger colleagues and I taught at my university during this past quarter. Our practicum

format was novel in two respects: first, we simulated a policy-formulating agency in which my colleagues, a man and a woman, and I acted as co-directors, and, second, we instituted a program of peer supervision in which half of the clients seen by students in the practicum were supervised by my colleagues and half, by fellow students. In order to spread the network of supervisory relations, we made it a rule that the student who served as supervisor for a given counselor could not be supervised, in turn, by the latter person. There were six students in the practicum, all selected for their relative competence as counselors-in-training. By accident, again, three were males and three, females. It happened, also not by design on our part as directors, that a female and a male student requested and obtained permission to form and counsel a group of clients. Neither was sophisticated in conducting therapy with groups, though each had read a good deal about it and had discussed extensively with resource persons the rationales and procedures for doing so. We arranged for them to be co-supervised as well--by a senior supervisor, a male, and by a female peer supervisor. From the outset, the co-therapists had trouble; the male, a professed evocative counselor, accused his female partner of being too assertive, directive, and domineering and overly talkative. He made the accusation in the initial session and with the clients present. The matter was discussed in one of our weekly staff meetings, and the male counselor was enjoined from similar punitive action against his co-counselor in the future.

At our next staff meeting, further discord was reported. It seems that, among other things, Jim, the male counselor had referred to female members of the group as "girls," behavior which infuriated Janice, his co-therapist, who had waited, however, until after the session itself to tell him. Apparently, the counselors had discussed the handling of the group with their co-supervisors and for several hours after the session had ended.

By the time of our next staff meeting, our co-therapists seemed to have resolved their problems--at least according to Jim, the male counselor, who talked extensively about it. At one point, in discussing the counselor's role generically, Jim referred to the counselor as "he" and spoke of something happening to "him." Since we had discussed the talk about "girls," Jim was asked whether there was anything peculiar about his remark. He seemed puzzled, so his use of the words "he" and "him" were identified as sexist. Whereupon, the junior co-supervisor, a female, it will be recalled, burst out with "Michael (her senior co-supervisor) stole my hat!" "What?" I asked. "Michael stole my hat!" she repeated. Whereupon, I asked others in the group what the female co-supervisor was talking about; eventually, the hunch emerged that she was still troubled by Jim's male chauvinism. (Michael, emphatically not a chauvinist, was the indirect and safer target).

At this point, the other senior supervisor, a female, exclaimed that Jim, not his female co-counselor, had done all of the talking, and had kept reiterating that now everything was resolved between him and his co-counselor. Another student, male, in the seminar interjected with agitation, "But Jim's face kept saying something very different from his words!" "I know," the female senior supervisor replied, "That's part of his trouble." Jim, the object of this discussion looked bewildered and said, "I don't know what you're talking about." So we turned to Janice, his co-counselor, and asked her what she thought. Her reply was, "I think we've still got a lot to talk through."

At our next staff meeting, the discussion continued and evolved into a calm, informative clarification of what it meant to be a female counselor in a male-dominated culture. Janice, the female counselor, made a comment, which other females in the group assented to. When asked what it felt like to be a female counselor, she said unselfcounsciously, "I don't want to be stereotyped that way; I just want to be myself!" That session was enlightening

for all of us, I believe, and will be long remembered.

Something else had happened in our practicum, which seems worth mentioning in this context. Throughout, my co-directors and I had stressed the importance of the "support system" as something that members of an agency could create to enhance their working relationships with each other and to facilitate their individual work with clients. In our final session, one of the students--female--said that she'd noted something different in our practicum group from the two others currently functioning. "We seem to be more cooperative, more considerate, more inclined to help each other," she said hesitantly. "And we're more apt to take care of the equipment, get our stuff put away and filed when five o'clock rolls around." We talked about that further in our last session.

What occurs to me now, is that we were better able to discuss and work through our hang-ups about sex differences because the "agency" itself had become a non-competitive arena in which we could get our work done. Male chauvinism and its counterpart, a hostile feminism, are inherently competitive stances, it seems to me, and can be mitigated by a redefinition of the work situation. Whether anything like the "industrial democracy" of Scandinavia, which has spread to West Germany and Holland, is possible in our society is an open question. It may be, however, that sex role and its attendant language become less of an issue when people are able to work together, with minimal status differential, and in common cause. Donna Grund-Slepack's (Reference Note 3) comparative research in the German Democratic Republic and the USA supports this hypothesis. Einar Thorsrud's (Thorsrud and Emery, 1964) industrial democracy project in Norway illustrates how this kind of milieu may be enhanced to produce effective teamwork in industrial organizations. Where these egalitarian conditions prevail and where national

purpose is a more focused and generally shared attitude than in our own country, we may infer, there will also be less likelihood of adversarial relations between women and men within a nation-state. This should hold despite obvious markers in the nation's language(s), which have evident reference to things masculine and feminine (and neuter), as in German and Norwegian. By the same token, vigilance against discriminatory sexism appears to be well-justified in a country like ours (cf. DeStefano, Reference Note 1).

With respect to sex-typing and the politics of language in counseling and psychotherapy, we seem to have created, within the microcosm of our advanced practicum, a constructive alternative to the adversarial relations that participants were accustomed to in everyday life outside of the practicum setting. As an example of changes brought about, there seems to have been at the end of the practicum less occasion for sexual chauvinism and its expression in language than there was at the beginning. Still, there is need for hard data as a check on this kind of claim. In the Group for Research and Development in Language and Social Policy at the Ohio State University, Johanna DeStefano and I are coordinating a multi-method attack on this and related problems where language analysis is indicated (see the prototypic analyses of language employed in counseling and psychotherapy employed by Patton, Fuhriman, and Bieber, 1977, and Bieber and Patton, in press; DeStefano, Reference Note 1). That is beyond the scope of this paper and, we hope, will be the substance of future reports.

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